Ibn Khaldūn [addendum] Encyclopedia Article

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Although most attention has been paid to Ibn Khaldūn's writings on history and society, he made an important contribution to other aspects of Islamic thought. He played a role in the extensive debate over Sufism, and defended its position in Islamic culture, provided that it adhered to the proprieties of religious law. The idea of coming to mystical knowledge by abandoning Islamic law and practices is a constant source of attack by Ibn Khaldūn; he emphasizes the role of the *shaykh*, or spiritual guide, and the place of mysticism within an orthodox understanding of Islam. He was also rather critical of many of the ambitious claims of the philosophers who thought that they could acquire knowledge of the most important features of reality by using reason alone.

Ibn Khaldūn is certainly no enemy of reason, but he argues that it operates within limits, and that religion is required for acquiring deeper knowledge than reason can provide. Similarly, when it comes to political philosophy, he criticizes the highly theoretical approaches of the philosophers who talk about the constitution of the ideal state as though this is something that could be established by reason and nothing else. The state cannot, he argues, be divorced from its history and social structure, and religion has to play a crucial role in its organization and goals. Although his ideas are heavily influenced by the philosophical concepts and arguments current at his time, Ibn Khaldūn was consistently skeptical of the ability of philosophy to reveal much of interest in either political or religious theory.

See Also

Islamic Philosophy.

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